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ABSTRACT

A seminar was offered to improve the understanding of tests as they are used in academic and employment decisions, and to assist participants in improving their scores on standardized tests through increased understanding of test-taking strategies. The long- and short-range implications of training students in the techniques of test-taking are discussed. Such seminars may be of some advantage to students, but benefits are often temporary at best. A more appropriate and valuable approach may be to produce alternative assessment procedures and to develop more culturally relevant assessment systems. (Author/KA)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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TEACHING TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

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It is a saddening, but undisputed fact, that black children as a group generally score lower on standardized tests than white children. Theories regarding the reasons for this phenomenon have been the subject of hundreds of books and articles, and have given rise to nation-wide controversy and debate. While the teaching of test-taking strategies is not intended to support nor refute the various views espoused about the achievements of black and white children, inherent in the offering of such training is the belief that effective manipulation of one's environment can result in positive change in test performance. More specifically, the assumptions that undergird a program in test-taking techniques are:

1. that all standardized tests draw upon the individual's experiential environment;
2. that examinees are at a great disadvantage when their environmental experiences vary widely from those deemed important by the test constructor; and
3. that test-wiseness, i.e., knowledge of test-taking strategies, brings the examinee's thought processes more in line with those of the test constructor and thus heightens his chances of more successful test performance.

During the Spring of 1977, the Tidewater Alliance of Black Educators, in cooperation with the Testing Bureau of Norfolk State College, offered a five-week workshop titled "Turning Students on to Taking Tests: Test-taking Skills for Students and Adults." The primary purpose of the workshop was to increase the participants' understanding of tests as they are used in academic and employment decisions, and to assist them in improving their scores on standardized tests through greater understanding of test-taking strategies. A secondary purpose was to provide suggestions to administrators, youth leaders, counselors, and other support personnel for improving their evaluation of student performance.

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A series of five two-hour sessions were offered on consecutive Saturdays, beginning in March and terminating in April. Topics included (1) General Test-taking Skills and Attitudes; (2) Strategies for Reading Improvement; (3) Strategies for Mathematics Improvement; (4) Types of Tests; and (5) Evaluation and Review. The seminars, conducted by faculty recruited from local colleges and the Norfolk public school system, were attended by approximately 400 students and adults and were offered without charge.

Planning

Several factors were considered as plans for the seminars emerged. What would be the target population? How could the participants be motivated to attend an intensive, non-credit workshop on Saturdays or after school hours? What specific objectives were to be accomplished and what subject-matter content would most appropriately meet those objectives? When and where would the seminars be offered? Who would conduct them?

For two previous years, Norfolk State, the predominantly black college in Norfolk, had offered test-taking seminars for its freshmen through the college's Counseling and Testing Services. The idea of expanding the seminars to reach public school students originated with Dr. Jesse Allen, Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services of Norfolk Public Schools and then president of the Tidewater Alliance of Black Educators. The Committee on Testing assembled by Dr. Allen included representatives from the public schools, Norfolk State, and Old Dominion University of Norfolk. Thus, the committee's membership at once offered expertise and interest in testing and afforded conduits for recruitment of participants and instructors from the community, local colleges, and the public schools. The greatest asset, however, was the members' enthusiasm for the project and their willingness to actively and persistently participate in the six months of planning that the

program required. The contagious fervor of the members soon spread to the Superintendent of the Norfolk Public Schools, who permitted entry into the schools for recruitment, and to the President of Norfolk State College, who offered the college's facilities for the workshop gathering. In the end, TABSE, the sponsoring organization, spent little or no money for supplies, equipment, or service because of the enthusiastic generosity of those who believed in the test-taking program.

Content of the Seminars

Seminar instructors, selected for their knowledge and expertise on the chosen topics, were largely responsible for the content of their sessions and for the manner in which the material was presented. In most instances, however, the instructors chose to administer a brief test on the related subject area, then allowed time for the examinees to explain why they chose the answers they did. This post-mortem was then followed by an introduction of test-taking principles with special emphasis being given to tactics that the students should have employed in approaching items of the initial test. A second test was then administered to determine how well the students were able to apply the principles offered by instructions.

Test-taking principles were drawn from a variety of sources. Some were developed by the instructors; some evolved through student discussions. The principles offered by Millman and Pauk¹ were generously demonstrated.

Interestingly, the principles of test construction found in most tests and measurement textbooks were found to be of great value in teaching test-taking skills. This approach requires the instructor to analyze test-construction

¹Millman, Jason and Walter Pauk, How to Take Tests, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, New York, 1969.

tion principles and to teach students to identify and take advantage of instances in which the principles break down. For example, one principle of test construction cautions item writers to make each distractor so plausible that an examinee who does not have full knowledge of the correct answer will likely choose an incorrect response. In actual practice, however, this aim is seldom fully realized. Therefore, in teaching test-wiseness, students are instructed to employ cue-using strategies to eliminate deceptive or superficial responses.

This somewhat esoteric approach was strongly supplemented by instruction in the more general strategies related to use of time, guessing, and error avoidance. Particularly for students who grossly lack facility or sophistication in test-taking, knowledge of general techniques (including the comprehension of test directions, scheduling of time to complete the test, and guessing if only right answers are scored) is of great significance.

Obviously, short-term seminars or workshops in test-taking can offer little or no training in subject-matter knowledge or problem-solving styles. Even without such training, however, students trained in general test-taking techniques can make significant gains in achievement test scores. Following is an abbreviated list of the test-taking tactics presented in the TABSE workshops.

Time-Using Strategies

- . Set up a schedule for progress through the test.
- . Begin to work as rapidly as possible with reasonable assurance of accuracy.
- . Answer easier questions first.
- . Omit or guess at items which resist a quick response.
- . Mark omitted items, or items which could use further consideration, to assure easy relocation.
- . Use time remaining after completion of the test to reconsider answers.

Error-Avoidance Strategies

- . Pay careful attention to directions, determining clearly the nature of the task and the intended basis for response.
- . Pay careful attention to the items, determining clearly the nature of the question.
- . Ask examiner for clarification when necessary, if it is permitted.
- . Check all answers.
- . Remember to select the correct alternative, identify the alternative choice and item number. Transfer this information from the test booklet (if necessary) to the answer sheet.

Guessing Strategies

- . Always guess if right answers only are scored.
 - . Never guess if the correction for guessing is more severe than a "correction for guessing" formula that gives an expected score of zero.
- Always guess even if the usual correction or a more severe penalty for guessing is employed, whenever elimination of options provides sufficient chance of profiting.

Implications

The success of the test-taking seminars can be evaluated at this point only in terms of the impressions verbalized by the participants and the sponsors. The real value can be determined only by the participants' performance on future standardized tests. But let us, for a moment, make the unlikely assumption that the test scores of every participant of the seminars improved significantly as a result of exposure to the seminars. Does that mean that training in test-taking is the key to alleviating score discrepancies between black and white students? It does not. While such an experience for students may be helpful -- and we hope and believe it is -- the cost and logistics involved in offering such special training to all minority students is mind-boggling, even assuming that organizations and funding agencies could be persuaded to undertake the venture. But more important, the perpetuation of a system that consistently favors the experiences of one group and ignores the experiences of another is unfair and very wrong; for it says to ethnically diverse populations that "your experiences are not worthwhile."

As an example, one item on the Stanford Binet Scale of Intelligence, the oldest and one of the most highly respected individual tests of intelligence, asks "What's the thing for you to do if another boy or girl hits you without meaning to do it?" According to the Manual for the Stanford Binet, the only satisfactory responses to this item are those which suggest excusing or overlooking the act. Clearly, this item favors the middle-class child who is taught more often never to hit back, and disfavors the lower-class child who is taught that he must defend himself at all costs. Both children in responding to the item follow precisely the instructions afforded by their training --

yet, one child is penalized; the other is rewarded. Perhaps this single item provides a glimpse into the reality of the testing world -- that, indeed, one must embrace the values of middle-class society, or suffer the stigma of being labeled as "mentally deficient."

Training in test-taking strategies is not a cure for poor test scores, no more than a band-aid is a cure for cancer. Testing companies must find ways to incorporate into their tests the kinds of items that are relevant to the experiences of all children -- the poor as well as the well-to-do. And those of us authorized to develop and implement testing procedures must assist, and be persistent, in the process, lest we be accomplices in the testing tragedy.

Moreover, we must be creative in producing alternative assessment procedures and demand that test constructors use their technology to develop more culturally relevant assessment systems. Human functioning is a multifaceted process, of which cognitive behavior is a single -- but only a single component. There are literally dozens of research studies that support the fact that job success in 75-80 percent of cases studies depends -- not upon job competence alone -- but upon the ability to relate to other human beings. From a more practical standpoint, each of us could cite at least one example of an individual who scored poorly on some qualifying examination and went on to accomplish what the test indicated was an impossible feat. If we have difficulty remembering such examples, let us be reminded that Milton was blind, and that Einstein failed mathematics in the public schools of Munich because he didn't like to memorize schoolwork. These facts strongly support the notion that motivational, social, and cultural behaviors are highly significant forces in human endeavors. While we give lip service to the efficacy of these characteristics in academic and employment success, our present assessment procedures are abysmally inadequate in tapping these traits, nor

are we careful in identifying or considering them in making decisions that affect human lives. We must make stronger efforts to measure affective meanings of concepts for minority students and to study the subjective culture and the personal cosmos of individuals outside of the mainstream of society.

Finally, teachers, administrators, counselors, and the lay public must reassess the objectives of education. At present, school curriculums are geared toward developing "well-rounded citizens." To this end, courses range from beginning biology to advanced bean-bag throwing with varying sorts of offerings in between. Students are allowed to elect from this conglomerate those courses that appeal to them, and their electives are most often the easier, less demanding courses. While our schools have become impotently flexible in their curriculum offerings, standardized tests continue to test for knowledge of hard, traditional academic content. There is a great disparity in what tests test for and what students are taught. Obviously, we must make some decisions about what is educationally valuable for our children and we must be tenacious in making test content more consonant with curriculum content.

Those of us involved in the assessment process have a great responsibility. We can shrug off that responsibility, comply with standard prescriptions, and perpetuate the present testing system. Or, we can be the researcher, the diagnostician, and the innovator in pursuing learned inquiry. We have the creativity and the capability to establish greater accuracy and greater fairness in behavioral assessment. That is what scientific advancement is all about. And those who are a part of it are those who challenge tradition and dare to make the necessary advancements toward change.